

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Barbara Hutchinson  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Year C

Has this ever happened to you?, a stretch in your life when you felt stalled? When what you thought, hoped, or expected would happen, didn't? When it was a struggle to get out of bed each morning, because it seemed that each time you did, another door was closed in front of your eyes? When the message you seemed to be getting from the world was, "not this, not yet, not here?"

You may have looked at this time with disinterest or despair, imagining only that something must be wrong with you: you're not good enough, you're not trying hard enough, or you lack something everyone else has; the lives of those around you seem to unfold in goodness, why not yours?

As you lie in bed, struggling to get up after you've already hit the snooze button more times than should be allowed, the old saying pops into your mind, "When God closes a door, God always opens a window." It's such a comforting thought, yet you don't believe it, because you're not seeing any windows right now. You wonder, "Maybe God has forgotten me" for God's apparent absence of direction in our lives, or hearing only "no" from everyone, can seem to be God's negligence.

This often leads us to forget about God, to move toward our own plans, to rush ahead, to figure out what's next on our own, for God's influence or presence has receded into the void.

It's interesting that this reaction, which seems so normal to us, was not at all the reaction Paul and Silas had to God's frequent actions of closing doors for Paul's second missionary journey.

The only commands they are hearing at the moment are, "Don't go to Asia." "Don't preach". "Don't go there." They were full of passion, energy, and desire to bring the good news to people on new continents, so they must have been frustrated. Yet knowing where not to go was equally as important to them and an equally valid message from God, as to where and when to go forward. They waited with watchful hearts, until God directed them forward and set in motion God's plan for Paul and Lydia to be connected on the riverbank outside of Philippi, a fairly large, Roman-occupied city, which brought forth the first home of Christianity in Europe.

It seems that one thing we can learn from Paul's second missionary journey, when he accepted "no" as part of God's directive and plan, is that knowing what doesn't work, what isn't the right path or the right timing, is equally important in our understanding of how we can faithfully respond to God's direction in our own lives. Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian, states in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, "... there is as much guidance in

what does not and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does – maybe more.”

I wonder if these stalled times of our lives, when it seems God’s message to us is to sit in the moment longer, rather than dash forward toward our own plan, can provide for us an invitation to a very different kind of prayer. Rather than asking God for what we need or want, could we echo Simeon’s words, when holding the messiah in his arms as Jesus was presented to him in the Temple, with the prayer in his heart, “I have you Lord, I have enough.”

“I have you Lord, I have enough.” This prayer can draw us into a time of listening and waiting, perhaps even creatively, when God’s directive appears to say, “No, not here, not yet, not this.” “I have you Lord, I have enough.” Could that be what was bounding about in Paul and Silas’ hearts, which we imagine were restless, but perhaps, were not?

Can this be an invitation to us? This doesn’t necessarily mean sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing, but neither charging forward and doing something of our own will, on our own, without God’s input. Rather it might be the kind of deep listening which Paul and Silas did, in full expectation that God would indeed provide a vision forward, which would chart the course for their next, and our next missionary expedition. This prayer “I have you Lord, I have enough” and creative listening require unguarded hearts and above all patience.

Paul and Silas show us what faithful waiting looks like. Somehow I think it’s tied to their understanding of their role not only to be Jesus’ believers or Jesus’ admirers, but to be actual followers of Jesus, for if we are to follow Jesus, we must wait for Jesus to lead.

So, we have Paul and Silas on Paul’s second missionary journey, a much longer and extended voyage than the first, and one which began by their first visiting all the churches Paul and Barnabas had founded on Paul’s first journey, so as to provide encouragement and guidance to the nascent communities. Now, being been stalled by God near the town of Troas, they found themselves wandering outside the Roman occupied city of Philippi.

Several unprecedented events followed, which tell us that this is all part of God’s plan, almost like a perfect storm in reverse, in which a confluence of unplanned, unexpected, and unusual events occur, which result in something extraordinary, which only God could have seen the vision for.

Paul and his male companions did not go first into the city, to the local synagogue, to find among the men a fertile ground for preaching and conversion. They went instead outside the city gates, by the riverbank, to find a group of women, foreign to them, praying on the Sabbath, and they began a conversation. Nothing about this encounter was appropriate by cultural norms. And yet it resulted in conversion, transformation, and a new missionary site, the first on the continent of Europe.

Let me introduce you to Lydia.

I fold my purple-stained hands, which don't feel very royal to me, in prayer, following the cues from my female companions, who pray to a God in the far off land of Israel. I don't know that place. I don't even know *this* place very well, as I am here as a foreigner, banished to the margins, outside the city walls. I work long and hard every day, crushing the murex shellfish to extract the purple dye, until my hands ache and I can barely stand up straight. The stench of turning the cloth purple permeates my being, and I feel disgraced and shameful.

There's a hole in my heart that is stretching forward toward something; something or someone, a personal and intimate relationship, where I could feel cleansed, restored, and set free from this oppression. These women who have kindly befriended me, speak of a God who doesn't leave them, but I can't see any God here before me. I do know, each time my brown knees settle into the moist earth by the riverbank, and I hear the water bounce over the rocks, and I pray, something awakens within me. I say their words, poorly and brokenly, not nearly as beautifully as they do, but I pray "Baruch atah A-donay, Elo-heinu Melech Ha'Olam". The words, Blessed are you, Lord G\_d, king of the universe" touch my soul in a strange way. My heart is stretched forward, unguarded, ready to receive.

In this unlikely encounter between Paul and Lydia, where longing and grace meet at the riverbank, where divine interaction and human faithfulness were fused into one event, God guides the action and works in and through all things, not just for good, but also for what would otherwise be impossible.

God seems to have diverted Paul hundreds of miles, and to have stopped him from preaching in Asia and from entering Mysia, all so he would be right on time to preach that day to this handful of women. God opened Lydia's heart to hear the truth in Paul's preaching for this one moment of conversion and transformation, which resulted in the planting of a mission in Europe.

After Lydia's baptism, something very interesting happened. She, this marginalized, foreign woman who was tagging along with a band of faithful Jews, ostracized to the area outside the city walls, had longed for a personal intimate relationship with a God who loved her. But in her baptism she understood what Paul would later say in his letter to the Galatians: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

After her baptism, she immediately invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home and set up a home for Christianity. This leap from baptism to hospitality shows that she deeply understood what baptism in Christ is all about. God opened her heart to the truth, and she could do nothing other than open her heart to all people.

The story suggests that she compels him to accept her offer, reminding him: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” She immediately pushed back against Paul’s hesitance to accept her hospitality based upon gender and class distinction and called him into a new understanding of the power of baptism. She called him to task and had already become a missionary, to the person who believed HE was the missionary to her. Alive with the Holy Spirit, drenched in the waters of her baptism, she was ministering to him, drawing him into a life where his beliefs could be lived out where the rubber met the road, pointing out the discrepancies between what he was preaching and how he was living, and inviting him to live more fully into the fullness offered to us by the risen Christ.

This reversal so often happens. The one seeking to share Christ with others ends up finding Christ in the “other’s” face and word and are the ones who are changed. This is true if we go to an unfamiliar territory for us, if we go around the street corner, if we sit with our guests at our community meal, and if we sit and talk to each other, here as we share our stories. Almost in single action, Lydia’s faith leads her to baptism, which issues forth immediately in hospitality, and in sharing in all the risks of the mission enterprise. Lydia was directive, seeing truth in front of her and deciding which action to take, as soon as God had directed her. All this is because she had a discerning heart, able to see through the events on the surface, into the deeper workings of God’s spirit.

During the Easter season, the question we ask ourselves each day, is “how does Jesus’ resurrection directly affect my life?” May our souls dance and delight in the Lord as Lydia’s did on that riverbank, the image of which echoes Miriam’s dance of joy with the tambourine on the far shore of the parted Red Sea, and may our actions in the name of the risen Christ be as direct, bold and life-giving as Lydia’s immediate and challenging hospitality was to Paul.

Amen.